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ABSTRACT

This paper provides guidlines for formally evaluating extended-day programs. Extended-day programs are defined as those attended before and after school by children between the ages of 5 and 14. A seven step evaluation process, in which the practitioner responsible for program administration plays a key role, is outlined and discussed. (Author/RH)

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The Practitioner: The Key Person in the Evaluation Process

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Introduction: Why Engage in Program Evaluation?

Evaluations of extended-day programs are of interest to diverse groups.** For those underwriting the costs of an extended-day program, evaluation can ensure program accountability by demonstrating that a program is doing what the director, staff and others claim it should be doing. For parents, program evaluation can provide a plan for improving the quality of care for their children. From an academic perspective, program evaluation offers the opportunity for applied research and testing of theories of social behavior. For the practitioner (the program director, teacher, supervisor or coordinator), program evaluation makes it possible to assess the program that he or she is providing for children, their parents, and the community.

Recently, the notion of program evaluation has been incorporated into a wide range of federal, state and local programs. Lawmakers, administrators, and taxpayers have begun to question the effectiveness of social programs which are subsidized with public funds from federal, state or local sources. The idea of accountability has achieved such popularity that many states have enacted "sunset" regulations. Such laws require that funding be stopped if a program fails to meet a certain number of its

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**Throughout this paper, we will be referring to extended-day programs as those programs attended by school-age children, between the ages of 5 and 14, before and after school. In such programs, children receive care for two to eight hours a day in a center-based or family-based setting. (Bergstrom & Dreher, 1975).

goals within a stated period of time. For many programs that receive federal funds, an evaluation component is mandated; other programs take the initiative themselves to evaluate the effectiveness of their program services to children and families.

From a more global perspective, program evaluation can also demonstrate the usefulness of a program in terms of social reform. Extended-day programs, for example, can be viewed as experiments to solve a social concern. Through an evaluation of the appropriateness of certain programs and curriculum experiences -- the teaching of basic skills, the provision of adequate supervision, the use of specific facilities, and the like -- the well-being of school-age children who have mothers employed outside the home can be ascertained. Variations on a basic program model may be seen as social experiments; evaluations can help the public assess which ones are more likely to produce the desired outcomes.

What is Program Evaluation?

Program evaluation has been defined by Wholey and others in the following terms:

> Evaluation (1) assesses the effectiveness of an ongoing program in achieving its objectives; (2) relies on the principles of research design to distinguish a program's effects from those of other forces working in the community; and (3) aims at program improvement through a modification of current operational practices. (Miringoff, 1980, p. 134).

It is also necessary to note at this point that the evalution should be planned so that it feeds back information which can be the basis for improving the program. This facet of the planning stage is critical.

Our discussion focuses primarily on a formal approach to evaluation. It is assumed that specific funds to conduct the evaluation will be made available from the agency or agencies sponsoring the extended-day program, or from other sources.

Who Should Be Involved in the Process?

As discussed by Miringoff, any plan for program evaluation must involve full participation of staff members involved in the program. The practitioner responsible for program administration, for example, should play an integral role in every stage of the evaluation, even though outside evaluators are involved. The practitioner is the natural person to deal with outlining the short- and long-term goals of the program, defining the types of questions to be asked, deciding who is to be involved in the evaluation process, and exploring the possible ways to answer the questions.

Community people should be involved in the evaluation process. They often have keen insights into the program, especially if the program children use facilities with which they are associated, such as the library and media center or recreation facilities. In fact school-age children are also of value to the evaluation process. Often articulate and aware of those

aspects of the program that they find favorable or unfavorable, these children can make specific suggestions as to how the program could be changed.

By involving themselves, their staff, the children, parents, and other community members in data gathering, practitioners are more likely to produce information needed to evaluate the achievement of the program's goals. Information gathered from many representative sources can help the practitioner and other program advocates provide a balance to efforts of policy makers and others who may find the programs ineffective or undesirable for one reason or another. Also, a well-conceived evaluation at the local level may counteract the negative effects of some poorly conceived large studies, conducted by evaluators who do not have a "grass-roots" understanding of extended-day programs.

What is the Evaluation Process?

The evaluation process consists of seven steps (see Figure 1). The practitioner plays a key role at each step.

Figure I

The Evaluation Process

Step 1	Understand the Fundamental Question: Why Evaluate?
Step 2	Clarify Short- and Long-Term Program Goals
Step 3	Plan the Evaluation Design
Step 4	Develop a Strategy to Collect Information
Step 5	Analyze the Information Collected
Step 6	Prepare and Disseminate the Evaluation Report
Step 7	Use Findings to Improve Program

Step 1. Understanding and Accepting the Purposes of the Evaluation. The process of evaluation is costly, time-consuming and demanding of all those involved. The costs and potential benefits to staff, children, parents and groups within the community must be identified and weighed before determining what specific aspects of the program are to be evaluated and how they are to be evaluated. Who will be involved directly in the evaluation process? How much time will this involvement require? Will it necessitate giving up other responsibilities? Are all interested parties aware of the fact that an evaluation will be conducted? Do they know why? (For example, is the evaluation mandated by agencies outside the program? Is it desired by people working inside the program? Who is most interested in seeing the evaluation results? Can the practitioner anticipate at the outset how he or she will make use of the results?) On balance, is participation in the evaluation process perceived as a positive, healthy, step? Once these questions have been answered, a commitment to proceed with the evaluation can be made.

Step 2. Clarifying Short- and Long-Term Programs. One of the most effective ways to clarify goals is to have a practitioner, usually the director, work with a team of people which includes staff, children, parents, and community representatives. Ultimately, it will be the responsibility of the practitioner to interpret the different needs of children, families, and the community, and to express these as clearly stated short-term and long-term program goals. The practitioner then communicates these goals to the evaluator(s).

This step is critical, and may well prove to be more difficult than it sounds. Reviews of several extended-day programs suggest that while many have broadly stated objectives, there is usually a lack of specificity as to what these mean on a short-term or long-term basis. The dialogue represented below (between a practitioner and a program evaluator) illustrates the gap which may exist between the practitioner's general conceptualization of the program and a statement of measurable goals for the program.

> Program Evaluator: How would you describe the goals of your program?
>
> Practitioner: As a director of a small extended-day program, I am trying to provide a safe and secure place for children; a place where several children can be together, work together and enjoy themselves in the afternoon. I am committed to providing a recreational program for the children where they can be safe and secure.
>
> Program Evaluator: Can you describe what you mean by "safe and secure" in more specific terms?
>
> Practitioner: By "safe and secure," I mean a place where children can come to play, engage in activity, and be with other children and an adult. A place which the children know is always going to be there. A place where they can come after school is out and be with others.
>
> Program Evaluator: Does "safe and secure" mean anything in terms of staff-child ratio?
>
> Practitioner: A staff-child ratio of one adult to eight children appears to work for us.
>
> Program Evaluator: Tell me, does "safe and secure" mean anything in terms of the indoor and outdoor environment for the children? Do you have indoor and outdoor facilities?
>
> Practitioner: Yes! We have beautiful facililities, both indoors and outdoors. Both areas have everything one could imagine and hope to use.
>
> Program Evaluator: Explain for me the physical layout of the indoors facilities and purpose of each piece of equipment, and please do the same for the outdoors. Perhaps we should consider doing a diagram.
>
> Practitioner: I'd be glad to and as I do it the recreational aspect of the extended-day program will become obvious to you.

Indoors we have areas where the children can engage in arts and crafts, such as weaving, painting and creating three-dimensional objects. Actually, there are three areas in the large playroom which are set up for these types of creative and expressive activities. There are other areas for indoor activities also.

Outdoors we have a number of areas in which the children can plan and engage in sports such as soccer, badminton and baseball. In addition to setting up the space and planning for these activities indoors and outdoors, we also have staff specialists who teach and help the children to engage in recreational activities; for example, one staff person coaches sports such as baseball, soccer and badminton, and another person teaches several arts and crafts activities to the children.

Program Evaluator: Okay, it appears that the challenge for us will be first to develop an evaluation process to understand the extent to which this is a safe and secure place for the children, and second, to determine the extent to which this is a recreational program. A variety of methods for collecting this information might be useful. The perceptions of staff, children, parents and others will be critical.

This dialogue suggests how the practitioner and the evaluator can work together towards a better understanding of the program. The dialogue also highlights the importance of the second step: ensuring that the evaluation design is based on a clear understanding of the goals of the program.

Step 3. Planning the Evaluation Design. This step is rather technical. As such, the expertise of the outside evaluator(s) will be helpful at this stage. An evaluation design which depends upon random assignment of children to different groups is usually impossible when working with an ongoing social program, such as an extended-day program. Therefore, some other evaluation design must be devised. This might involve measurements of behaviors, attitudes, skills, and the like, before and after participation in the extended-day program, or the comparison of children enrolled in one program with children enrolled in another program. While the technical aspects of this step are the responsibility of the evaluator(s), the practitioner should remain informed, to ensure that the evaluation design does not impose an unexpected burden on the program and does not violate any ethical constraints.

Step 4. Developing a Strategy to Collect Information. This step obviously depends upon successful completion of the preceding steps--specific program goals must have been identified and an evaluation design must be in place. Again, the technical expertise of the evaluator(s) is important here. One "control" that the practitioner needs to be aware of is that more than one data collection format should be used. There is a wide range of formats for collecting data. Dozens of standardized test instruments exist, and one or more of these may be appropriate for a particular program evaluation. Many of these are described in The Eighth Mental Measurements Yearbook. Much use can be made of informal assessment techniques -- a few of which are described here briefly. A daily log, a format for recording observations, enables the staff member to record both

daily plans and thoughts and feelings about what has happened each day in the extended-day program. A log kept over a period of time is a useful reference source; it might be used, for example, to pinpoint activities which occurred on specific days.

A daily log, kept by the school-age child, is also a useful evaluation tool. By encouraging the child to provide a systematic record of his activities, the evaluator can determine the type of activities a child engages in, the amount of time he/she devotes to an activity, the other children and adults involved in the activity, and so on. It is helpful to have the child record in the diary in a manner facilitating the coding of data along specific dimensions.

Another method is participant observation. This refers to a method of study whereby a staff member actively participates in a group in order to learn more about both individual members and the group as a whole. The staff member might interact with the group in a variety of ways including eating, playing games, sports activities, or craft projects. In some instances, the children might know they are being observed; in other situations the children will be unaware of the staff person's role as observer. After each session the participant observer records his impressions and ideas, either in written or taped form.

Checklists provide a system for recording the presence or absence of certain behaviors. The observer is simply required to give a "yes" or "no" response on the checklist. (A participant observer might use a checklist after he/she had left the scene of the observation while a non-participant observer could simultaneously observe the children and complete a checklist.) Since the questions on the checklists are compiled in advance, they enable one to rapidly gather a great deal of information relating to the child's language, cognitive, perceptual, social and emotional development. Checklists allow one to quickly determine the specific books the children are reading, the games they are playing, and the other ways they are spending their time.

A sociometric test is a series of questions asking children whom they would like to associate with in specific situations. The information gathered from these questionnaires can be combined to make a sociogram, which enables staff to learn which children like to associate with one another. Sociometric tests sometimes provide information about the status of children within the group; that is, which children the group considers desirable as workmates and playmates and which children the group considers less desirable as workmates and playmates.

Parent interviews provide the opportunity for the extended-day staff and parent to discuss the child, to share information, and to gain a better understanding of the child in a number of settings. Children this age can also be interviewed and are frequently reliable in the information that they report.

A case study of a child and family often provides useful information on the meaning of the program for the families involved. The interviewer can, for example, gather information regarding the value of the program for the child and his/her family. The focus of the case study will depend on the objectives of the extended-day program.

Portfolios can be designed to store samples of children's creations and written work. Each child could have his/her own portfolio. As the child creates a significant work, either the original work or a photograph of it can be placed in the portfolio. Each sample should be accompanied by an index card which includes the date the work was completed, the time of day, the name of the person collecting the work, and notes regarding the creation. This work documents not only the child's interests, but also the extent to which there has been development in specific areas such as the writing of stories and poems and painting and drawing.

The choice of formats used will depend in part upon the evaluation design. The practitioner should remember that information collected as part of the evaluation process can also be of great use to the extended-day staff as they talk with children, as they meet with parents, and as they work together to develop the program.

Step 5. Analyzing the Information Collected. Depending on the formats used to gather information, there may be anecdotal data, samples from logs or portfolios, or statistical data. While the analysis can be implemented by outside evaluator(s), the practitioner has a role in ensuring that the information is in fact representative of the program and that conclusions drawn from the data correspond to reality. Whatever conclusions the data point to -- be they critical or commendatory -- they should seem valid to those who best know the program.

Step 6. Preparing and Disseminating the Evaluation Report. This task is best accomplished as a collaborative effort. The practitioner can provide information relating to the background, organization and goals of the program, while the evaluator(s) can describe the evaluation design and the results obtained from the data analysis. Both practitioner and evaluator should identify the practical, political, and ethical implications of the final report. Issues of privacy and confidentiality must be respected. Anyone quoted by name in the final report should have an opportunity to verify the accuracy of the quotation. If the entire valuation has in fact been a collaborative venture, the anlaysis and recommendations in the final report should not come as a surprise to anyone. Finally, the tone and content of the report should be appropriate for the agency or individuals who initiated the evaluation. If the report, or portions of it, are going to be shared with parents, or funding sources, or others, the report should also reflect their contributions and views.

Step 7. Incorporating Evaluation Findings Into the Ongoing Program. Whether the evaluation report is positive, negative, or somewhere in between, the process should not stop when the report is distributed. It is the practitioner's responsibility to use the information generated by the evaluation to improve or strengthen the existing program. The evaluation may, for example, suggest a way to clarify or rethink program goals, or indicate a need for new or different staff development efforts to achieve program goals. The practitioner may want periodically to repeat some of the steps of the formal evaluation process on an informal basis or to assess the continued growth and development of the program.

In one sense, the practitioner or program administrator is always evaluating the extended-day program, determining whether things are going well and whether children, staff and parents are pleased with the

program. The experience of a formal evaluation brings an external perspective to this process. It helps to clarify program goals and enriches the practitioner's repertoire of techniques for assessing the effectiveness of the program. If the evaluation process is carried out in a thoughtful, comprehensive, and collaborative fashion, it should result in an improved program to meet the needs of children, staff, parents, and the community.

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